

Week Ending Friday, February 26, 1999

**Remarks on the Posthumous Pardon  
of Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper**

*February 19, 1999*

Thank you. First of all, I'd like to welcome this distinguished assemblage here: Dr. King and the members of the Flipper family and your friends, Secretary West, Congressman Clyburn, General Powell, Deputy Secretary Hamre, Under Secretary de Leon, General Ralston, General Reimer, Secretary Caldera. I understand we're joined by Clarence Davenport, the sixth African-American graduate of West Point, other distinguished West Point graduates who are here. Welcome to all of you.

There's one person who could not be here today—Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder, I'm glad to see you—the one person who could not be here today I want to acknowledge, and that is Senator Max Cleland from Georgia, who has done a lot to make this day possible. We thank him in his absence.

I welcome you all to an event that is 117 years overdue. Here in America's house of liberty, we celebrate ideas like freedom, equality, our indivisibility as one people. Great leaders lived here, people like Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Lincoln, the Roosevelts, after whom this room is named. All of them deepened the meaning of those words while they lived here. But we must be candid and say that the special quality of American freedom is not always extended to all Americans.

A word like "freedom," to be more than a slogan, requires us to acknowledge that our "more perfect Union" was created by imperfect human beings, people who did not always define freedom in the ways that we would, and in ways that they knew they should. For this word to live for ourselves and our children, we must recognize it represents a difficult goal that must be struggled with every day in order to be realized.

Today's ceremony is about a moment in 1882, when our Government did not do all

it could do to protect an individual American's freedom. It is about a moment in 1999 when we correct the error and resolve to do even better in the future.

The man we honor today was an extraordinary American. Henry Flipper did all his country asked him to do. Though born a slave in Georgia, he was proud to serve America: the first African-American graduate of West Point; the first African-American commissioned officer in the regular United States Army. He showed brilliant promise and joined the 10th Cavalry. While stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, he perfected a drainage system that eliminated the stagnant water, and malaria, plaguing the fort. Still known as "Flipper's Ditch," it became a national landmark in 1977.

He distinguished himself in combat on the frontier and then was transferred to run a commissary at Fort Davis in Texas. In 1881 Lieutenant Flipper was accused by his commanding officer of improperly accounting for the funds entrusted to him. A later Army review suggested he had been singled out for his race, but at the time there wasn't much justice available for a young African-American soldier. In December a court-martial acquitted him of embezzlement, but convicted him of conduct unbecoming an officer. President Chester A. Arthur declined to overturn the sentence, and in June of 1882 Lieutenant Flipper was dishonorably discharged.

His life continued. He became a civil and mining engineer out West. He worked in many capacities for the Government, as special agent for the Department of Justice, as an expert on Mexico for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as a special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior. He died in 1940 at the age of 84.

But even after his death, this stain of dishonor remained. One hundred and seventeen years have now elapsed since his discharge. That's a long time, even more than the span of his long life, more than half the

history of the White House, indeed, of the United States itself—and too long to let an injustice lie uncorrected.

The Army exonerated him in 1976, changed his discharge to honorable, and reburied him with full honors. But one thing remained to be done, and now it will be. With great pleasure and humility, I now offer a full pardon to Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper of the United States Army. This good man now has completely recovered his good name.

It has been a trying thing for the family to fight this long battle, to confront delays and bureaucratic indifference, but this is a day of affirmation. It teaches us that, although the wheels of justice turn slowly at times, still they turn. It teaches that time can heal old wounds and redemption comes to those who persist in a righteous cause. Most of all, it teaches us—Lieutenant Flipper's family teaches us—that we must never give up the fight to make our country live up to its highest ideals.

Outside of this room, Henry Flipper is not known to most Americans. All the more reason to remember him today. His remarkable life story is important to us, terribly important, as we continue to work—on the edge of a new century and a new millennium—on deepening the meaning of freedom at home, and working to expand democracy and freedom around the world, to give new life to the great experiment begun in 1776. This is work Henry Flipper would have been proud of.

Each of you who worked so hard for this day is a living chapter in the story of Lieutenant Flipper. I thank you for your devotion, your courage, your persistence, your unshakable commitment. I thank you for believing and proving that challenges never disappear, but in the long run, freedom comes to those who persevere.

Thank you very, very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:33 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to William C. King, Lieutenant Flipper's great-grandnephew; and former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin Powell, USA (Ret.). This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

## **Remarks at a Dinner Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the NAACP**

*February 19, 1999*

I have been friends with Chairman Bond a long time. We have had many interesting conversations; not all of them have been that laudatory. But Julian, I have that on film now, and I'm going to play it—[laughter]—whenever I need a little boost in life, I'm just going to turn that film on. [Laughter]

Thank you. I want to say publicly something I said to Julian Bond privately when he agreed to become the chair of the NAACP. I called him, and I thanked him. And I thank him again. And I thank all of you for what you are doing.

When Kweisi Mfume agreed to become president of the NAACP and leave the Congress, I wept. [Laughter] But he told me, he said, "Now, don't worry." He said, "I'll have a good replacement in Congress"—and he did—"and I need to do this. It's the right thing for my country and for my people." And he, too, has served well. And I'm very proud of our friendship and of the service.

I thank all of you who are helping. When Suzanne DuBose was up here talking about scientists slowing down the speed of light and the rest of us speeding up the speed of justice, I wish I had thought of that myself. [Laughter] That line won't rest. It will be used again and again. [Laughter]

I want to thank Bell Atlantic and all the other companies who are standing with the NAACP. I am delighted to see Bishop Graves and the other officers here. And Bishop, thank you for your friendship.

Most of the people with our administration have been introduced, but I want to thank Secretary and Mrs. West and Secretary Slater and Bill Lann Lee for being here, and Judy Winston, who did such a good job with our initiative on race. I want to acknowledge, also, the presence in the audience of Mary Beth Cahill, our new Special Assistant to the President for Public Liaison. And I want to recognize Ben Johnson, and many of you know he is the first Director of the White House Office on our Initiative for One America, and I thank him for doing that. Since Bell is so well recognized, there's one other former member of the White House staff